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Edward Gaylord Bourne

By FRANCIS H. HERRICK, Ph. D.
Professor of Biology.

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EDWARD GAYLORD BOURNE.*

By FRANCIS H. HERRICK, PH. D.,
Professor of Biology.

This is in some respects the most interesting season of the year because in our latitude it is the time of vigorous growth. We speak of the decay of life in the fall and of its renewal in the springtime. There is really no renewal and no decay, no break in the chain of life, no snapping of a single necessary link,—only a repression of the vital forces followed by a quicker beating of the pulse. That old simile of physical life from physical death,—the spontaneous generation of living matter from dead,—which held sway for at least two thousand years, and is still appealed to by moralists, was radically wrong. The present order of nature is life from precedent life, first the living seed, then the leaf, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear. The individual dies it is true, but a vital part of it, the seed, may live on, so that the chain of the physical life even may be continued unbroken from year to year and from age to age.

This is also the season of youth, and for you all before whom there lies, I trust, a stretch of fifty years of productive life, it is well to think of this wonderful gift, this privilege to live and to form a part of an endless chain of life; it is well for us all to reflect anew upon our inheritance, our opportunities, and our inspirations.

Therefore in paying this tribute to the first regular teacher of history in this University, I shall speak of the inspiration of his life, for I have seldom seen a man more truly alert and alive than he. Others are better able to speak of

*Address spoken in substance to the students of Adelbert College, March 16, 1908.

his scholarship and place as a historian, and their estimates will surely be made. But I wish the men of this year and time to know something of the man who for seven years went in and out of these halls, who often stood where I now stand, who was an inspiring teacher of hundreds of graduates from this College between the years of 1888 to 1895, and who at the time of his death, just three weeks ago to-day, had served as professor of history at Yale University for thirteen years, and had not completed the forty-seventh year in his life. I refer to Edward Gaylord Bourne.

Professor Bourne was born at Strykersville, N. Y., June 24, 1860, and graduated from Yale University in 1883, where he received the degree of Ph. D. in 1892. He served as instructor in history and lecturer on political science at Yale from 1886 to 1888, as instructor in history from 1888 to 1890, and as professor of history from 1890 to 1895 in Western Reserve University. On July 17, 1895, he was married to Miss Annie Nettleton at Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He was recalled to Yale as professor of (American) history in 1895, and died at New Haven after an illness of nearly two years, February 24, 1908. His wife and five children survive him. I know that he is dead, but I also know that his spirit still lives and works in the hearts of all who really knew him.

Professor Bourne was interested in all that pertains or that ever pertained to men, nations and things. He seemed to go about with living tentacles stretching in every direction, seizing, testing, weighing, questioning all things. His curiosity was without a limit, and not of the idle sort. He was ready to exchange opinions and carry on an argument with anybody, at any time or place.

He had an insatiable passion for books and libraries, not because of the pleasure they minister to the collector, but because they are human documents which reflect both the

wisdom and the follies of mankind. Upon entering the house or the room of a friend he would steer straight for the book-shelves, as if drawn by instinct, and never seemed to tire of handling and reexamining book after book. It was appropriate that he should have been chosen to speak at the laying of the corner stone of Hatch Library.

In walking or riding along the streets nothing seemed to escape him. It apparently grieved him to miss seeing or hearing anything that was new. He once dismounted his wheel, and picked up an Indian stone axe, which had doubtless fallen from a load of earth, on the pavement of Euclid Avenue between the College and Fairmount Street. His mind was a ready reference-file on all kinds of subjects down to the current events of the day, and you could consult it with better confidence than the newspaper, because it mirrored both past and present alike.

Edward Bourne characterized in his own person Lessing's definition of science: "The everlasting struggle of the human mind after truth." He had what we call a "scientific head," that is he saw problems to be solved everywhere, and he weighed causes and effects in a judicial spirit. His writings never suggest the advocate. With his passion for truth, his omnivorous reading and an unusually retentive memory, he combined evident fairness with common sense in such a degree that he became a critic of widely acknowledged skill and power. He would spare no labor and no pains to find the truth of a debated question, and he early became a master of the modern methods of historical inquiry. Few were more skillful in the ready handling of reference and source-books of every description, and he acquired a reading command over at least eight languages. With ideals of scholarship so high, combined with rare and indefatigable powers of search, it will be no wonder if future workers on the veins which he opened

find few grains of golden ore to reward their labor. Yet, when I knew him, Mr. Bourne never impressed you as a plodder, but as one with leisure at command. He was seldom known to be in a hurry to pass you on the street or to leave your rooms or office. The secret of his accomplishment was undoubtedly this: when necessary he could work long and hard at a stretch, but his resources were always at command, and he worked easily and effectively. It should be added that his habits of life and work were doubtless changed in some respects after his final settlement at New Haven.

Naturally such a man was not inclined to take opinions at second hand, as most men seem to do. He must verify everything himself. The following illustration of this habit is instructive. About 1894, or not far from that time, President Penrose of Whitman College, Oregon, delivered to the students in this chapel what might be described as a thrilling address, like that which he had doubtless spoken in many parts of the country, on Marcus Whitman and his marvellous ride on horseback and alone across the Rocky Mountains to the east, in the winter of 1842-43 to save the great Northwest, or what is now Oregon, Washington, and a part of Idaho, to the United States, then, or rather at a later time, said to be in imminent danger of falling into the clutches of the British lion by annexation to Canada. The speaker was making this stirring appeal to spread the story of Whitman, to arouse enthusiasm, and to secure funds for his College. Professor Bourne was present. I well remember the feeling of surprise which came over me in the thought of my total ignorance of a great national character, and of an event of such world-wide importance. Probably few of us, excepting Mr. Bourne, had ever heard of this hero's name, and much less his history, and I fear that some of us straightway forgot it; but not so with our

critical friend, whose particular business was to know American history in all its growth and antecedents. I think he resolved then and there to sift that Whitman story to the bottom, but whether this was the case or not, sift it he did with startling results. His conclusion of the whole matter appeared in its final form in 'Essays of Historical Criticism,' published some seven years later (1901), where it forms the leading article of over one hundred pages, in the series of publications commemorating the Bicentennial of Yale University.

We sometimes lament that the public, old and young, should seemingly prefer to read its natural history out of the books of the so-called "nature fakirs," but according to the arraignment of Professor Bourne, which seems to me unanswerable, the myth of Marcus Whitman's ride is without a parallel in both the annals of civil history and in the tales of animal life, for the vagaries of the nature romancer have not yet been adopted by the grave historians of animal lore or embodied in standard text-books.

The facts of the Whitman story were found to be as follows: In the fall of 1842, a worthy pioneer missionary of Oregon, who later fell a martyr to the cause of Christianity, started on a journey east, concerned with the business of his mission, and without any political reasons whatever. "Fifty-two years later," says Professor Bourne, "in the most careful appraisal of human achievement in America that has ever been made, the voting for the Hall of Fame at New York University, Marcus Whitman received nineteen votes out of a possible ninety-eight to be ranked as one of the fifty greatest Americans . . . History will be sought in vain for a more extraordinary growth of fame after death." The astounding fact thus revealed by Professor Bourne is that in an age abounding in documents a purely fictitious narrative can grow up, become accepted

by competent historians, and completely displace the truth in a comparatively few years, and towards the very close of the nineteenth century. One ultra-enthusiast has even compared Marcus Whitman with Abraham Lincoln, and without any disparagement to the former. As an illustration of exact scholarship and of the scientific methods of modern historical criticism, this essay may be read with profit by every student of history.

Mr. Bourne's most elaborate work is without doubt his 'History of Spain in America,' which appeared in 1904, and which has already been translated into Spanish under the title of 'Espana en America, 1450-1580' (Habana, 1906). This was preceded by 'The History of the Surplus Revenue of 1837' in 1885, the 'Essays in Historical Criticism' in 1891, already referred to, and regarded by some as the best of his published writings, because it brings into sharp focus the wide range of his interests and his rare critical skill. There appeared finally *The Historical Introduction to 'The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803,'* a work issued separately in 1907 under the title of 'Discovery, Conquest, and Early History of the Philippine Islands, with Maps and Plates.'

To these books, which are peculiarly his own, should be added eight distinct works in which Mr. Bourne had a part either as editor or translator. Chief among them are: 'Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto in the Conquest of Florida' (1904), 'The Voyages and Explorations of Samuel de Champlain' (1604-1616), translated by Mrs. Bourne, 'The Northmen, Columbus and Cabot, 985-1503.' The list of addresses and critical articles, some of which he gathered in his "Essays" embrace more than twenty titles, and could be greatly extended by the addition of his many notes and minor papers.*

*A bibliography of Professor Bourne has been published in the Yale Alumni Weekly (Reprint No. 2 from the issue for March 25, 1908), in which will be found several notable tributes to the author as teacher, scholar, and friend of students.

Of the appearance of the man himself, a word only will be said. Everyone would agree that he possessed a decidedly intellectual face. When I first knew him his hair was as dark as a Spaniard's. Save for his dress he might almost have stepped out of one of Valasquez' canvasses. His clear gray eyes seemed to penetrate beyond immediate objects to those wider horizons of all natural things by which the present and past are related as cause and effect. No detail, however, was lost. Physically he was lame, but there was no limp in mind or spirit, and after a brief acquaintance this circumstance was entirely forgotten. Any physical defect is apt to make its possessor reticent, timid, or morbid, as if a permanent apology to nature were demanded. Not so with Edward Bourne. On the physical side also his eye bore a challenge. He was strong and enduring. On the bicycle he descended Mount Washington by the carriage road, and the more formidable Pike's Peak from among the clouds.

He was an ardent traveller, and always ready for new enterprises. The glamor of the past did not deceive him; he interpreted the past through the present. Any street or suburb of Cleveland was investigated in the same spirit in which he would explore the remote corners of Paris or Rome. His originality of thought and purpose made him a leader whether in a bicycle ride or in the solution of intricate historical problems. With his rare mind and good humor, he was a delightful companion. There was never a dull hour in his comradeship. Think of how few this can truly be said! His was one of those rare spirits which fill up every interstice of the day with something quaint, humorous, suggestive and interesting.

Is not a character so broad and fair, so devoted to the truth, so truly religious in the fundamental conceptions which history and philosophy lay beneath the longings of

the human heart, worthy of our study and of our imitation? Never in the sense of a servile imitation, however, for above all things let us be ourselves! We must stand on our feet, and work out our own salvation, but let us never cease to cherish the inspiration of noble lives.

I know that Edward Bourne is dead, but his spirit is worthy to live. Life seemed good to him. Few loved it better. His motto might have been—"One world at a time!" We may be sure that he drank of the "loving cup" gratefully to the end.

Professor Bourne matured early in life; his formative period was well in the background. He lived wisely and achieved much, but many honors awaited him and would have come to him naturally had his life been prolonged.

In summing up this tribute to the life of Edward Gaylord Bourne we might paraphrase the eloquent words with which he closes his essay on Prince Henry the Navigator: "Rightly is he numbered among those who by a studious and valiant life have freed themselves from the law of death."

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